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LoC: The Line “out” of Control in the Region of Kashmir

Ather Zia

In 2013 Reshma Bi, a seventy-year-old Kashmiri woman, was pining for her sons in her native village of Charonda, in the Uri sector of the Indian-administered area of Kashmir. A few years earlier, Reshma’s sons had fled to the Pakistan-administered side of Kashmir to escape police persecution because of their alleged role in cross-LOC trafficking. Uri is a garrison town near the Line of Control that separates the two regions of Kashmir under separate Indian and Pakistani control. The erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, now divided and under Indian military occupation, stands as a testament to the fraught postcolonial aftermath of the partitioning of India and Pakistan in 1947, which is manifested in the landmark divide, the Line of Control. The LoC is a formal ceasefire line, arbitrated between the newly independent states of India and Pakistan by the UN in 1949,¹ which partitions Kashmir into the Pakistan-occupied region, or Azad (Free) Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), and the Indian-occupied territory, known as the State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). This was meant to be a temporary bifurcation till a plebiscite took place in the region, but instead, India and Pakistan have waged three full-scale wars over Kashmir. Low-intensity warfare remains ongoing at the LoC, which has been called the most dangerous place on earth.² Currently, in Indian-occupied Kashmir there are about 700,000 Indian troops; with a Kashmiri population of about 5.5 million, that is 1 soldier for every 8 Kashmiris, making Kashmir one of the world’s most militarized regions. More than 70,000 people have been reported killed in counterinsurgency operations, more than 8,000 forcibly disappeared, and more than 60,000 subjected to custodial torture.³

In the Indian mainstream discourse particularly, the lack of attention to the unceasing contestations of the bifurcation of Kashmir, its layered history and the complexities of Kashmiri subjectivities, has been a symptom of the short-sighted political analysis of the region.⁴ The division of Kashmir continues to animate the politics of Kashmiri Muslims as well as the significant Kashmiri minority populations, and it shapes their politics of survival and hopes for independence, as well as fueling the policies of the two adversarial nation-

states.⁵ However, in the mainstream Indian discourse, and to a lesser extent in the Pakistani mainstream one, the Kashmir issue generally is framed as a black-and-white one. In India, Kashmir is generally framed through the lens of Pakistan's proxy war, religious terrorism, or a domestic dispute.

The poignant details of lives such as Reshma's and other Kashmiris across the contested divide where the LoC stands illuminate the ways it is not a final partition but a symbol of a political promise. Reshma was agonized by separation from her children and one day decided to just walk across the LoC and join her sons permanently, as it would be impossible for her to return the way she had left. For Reshma, this act of crossing the LoC was a personal decision, but it brought the two nuclear nations, India and Pakistan, to the brink of war in 2013. The tenuous ceasefire agreement in 2004 between the Indian and Pakistani armies could not withstand what should have just been a grandmother's routine family visit to her erstwhile-undivided village. Within one week of Reshma's crossing the LoC, the Indian soldiers erected new bunkers to obstruct mobility across the LoC. The Pakistani troops objected to Indian constructions, which violated the ceasefire, and tensions escalated, resulting in killings of soldiers and civilians on both sides.

Epistemic Violence of "Border" Talk?

In response to this incident, a leading Indian newspaper claimed, "Tit-for-tat actions over a case of border crossing."⁶ It is significant that the report used the word *border* for *LoC* with ease, and even the allegation against Reshma's son was categorized as "cross-border" trafficking rather than a "cross-LOC" issue. The interchangeability of *LoC* with *border* is not new but is symbolic of the routine erasure of the historicity of the Kashmir dispute in the Indian discourse (in mainstream media, government, or dominant political analysis).⁷ In the context of the UN-arbitrated agreement in 1949, the demarcation between AJK and J&K was termed the ceasefire line. The final contours of this partition were subject to the results of the plebiscite, which is pending; thus, no international border technically exists between AJK and J&K.

I argue that this use of border terminology is a form of epistemic violence emblematic of Indian state policy that frames the Kashmir issue as an internal disturbance, rather than an international dispute to be resolved by UN mandated resolutions. In narrativizing Kashmir, the proliferation of the word *border* when none exists subverts the legal role of Kashmiris as the key stakeholders and frames the dispute as a "bilateral" one involving the two larger nation-states.

By the same token, militants, even those who are citizens of AJK, are called “foreign” militants in the Indian discourse or reductively labeled “Pakistani” to feed the narrative about Pakistan’s proxy war. This seemingly banal interchangeability of *LoC* with *border* tacitly propagates the notion of Kashmir as a bilateral dispute and conveniently erases Kashmiri demands for sovereignty. A recent example of this persistent and troubling interchangeability is evident in the statement of the chief of the Indian army, Bipin Rawat, where he liberally substituted the word *border* for *LoC*, as did the newspaper reporting on the story.⁸ Such usage by authorities and the media is emblematic of the Indian government’s narrative reinforcing the idea of the *LoC* as a concrete border-in-making where, technically, none exists.

This implicit epistemic violence masks the historical and political reality of Kashmir and frames the region as more or less permanently bifurcated, a solution that is not acceptable to all Kashmiris and cannot be arrived at without their consent. The choice of nomenclature also expresses the nationalist desires of the Indian state, which criminalizes the Kashmiri demand for political resolution, freedom of mobility, and unification of the bifurcated region. I argue that the symbol of the *LoC*, its history, and contestations of nomenclature actually all point to the unified nature of Kashmir prior to 1947 and the Kashmiri people’s continuous clamoring for independence and sovereignty that predates the making of India and Pakistan.

The *LoC*, which is actually referred to as the Khooni Lakeer (Bloody Line) by Kashmiris, is testament to a very fragile territorial agreement, which has torn asunder families, communities, and villages, and a people who continue to hope for self-determination. Even though the UN mandate allows Kashmiris to opt to join India or Pakistan, the third option of independence has been both an explicit and an implicit demand of the Kashmiri people. The dispute in Kashmir needs to be understood without the presentism enforced by contemporary Indo-Pak political and social geographies, and it is imperative to understand the postcolonial history of border making in 1947 that produced complicated and fraught subjectivities on both sides of the *LoC*.

Circa 1972: Shimla Agreement

In 1971 India and Pakistan signed the Shimla Agreement, considered a peace treaty between the two states, and agreed to work toward bilateral cooperation and “to uphold the inviolability of the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir.”⁹ The ceasefire line demarcated by the UN was renamed the *LoC*,

and India increasingly treated the LoC as a de facto border, much to the consternation of Kashmiris on both sides. Kashmiris also saw the name change as foretelling the bifurcation as permanent and legitimate.¹⁰

The 830-kilometer-long line cuts through hamlets and villages, leaving a traumatic partition in its wake. The partition for the last seventy years has created fractured Kashmiri subjectivities with allegiances spanning both sides of the LoC. The political desires of the Kashmiris across the LoC have been criminalized, and even made irrelevant, by the ruling nations. Moreover, with the passing of time, older generations of Kashmiris who were important witnesses and links to the historical past are gone or slowly passing away. All this contributes to a forced amnesia about the knowledge of political and social life in a time when Kashmir was undivided. The old linkages—of trade, education, and culture—from J&K across the LoC with the AJK and with the rest of what now is Pakistan have been fully replaced by quickly multiplying connections of trade and communication with India through air, road, or railway travel.

Mona Bhan offers insights into how people envisaged the bifurcation of Kashmir in her ethnographic study of the cultural minority known as Brogpas; a population of about three thousand spread across four villages around the LoC in Ladakh province of Indian-administered Kashmir.¹² The communities living near the frontiers are mostly illiterate and poor, thus, doubly at a disadvantage in discerning the political strategies that enforce normalization of the new order. Bhan records a Buddhist Brogpa elder telling her, “The last I travelled to Ganishah was in 1948 to retrieve my goat that a local herder (*pajlu*) had stolen. . . . I decided to return in a few days . . . soon after the 1948 war broke out and the government created the border [*bardar*]. . . . we no longer visit Ganishah; we hope they still worship our common gods and ancestors.” The Brogpa elder had never realized that he would not be able to fetch his goat back. In his narrative, the elder also uses the word *border* that represents the trickle-down effect of the persistent Indian discourse framing the LoC as the de facto border. And indeed the LoC, despite its formally temporary nature, has functioned as a de facto border separating families and communities and imposing nonnegotiable restrictions on mobility across the two regions. On the one hand, the LoC functions as a border; on the other, it does not operate like some other borders that are more porous, because till 2004 no travel was allowed across the line, and mobility is still difficult and severely restricted for Kashmiris.

In the early 1990s, Kashmiri youth began crossing the LoC from the J&K area to AJK in order to train in armed resistance to Indian rule. Kashmiris

supported the popular uprising in Indian-occupied Kashmir that called for the unification of the two parts, even as the allegiance of the militant groups varied between those who wanted independence or accession to Pakistan. A Kashmiri slogan expressing support for winning freedom through militant struggle went thus: “Bardarr [“border,” colloquial] paar jayen gey, Kalashnikov layein gey” (we will cross the border, and get Kalashnikovs). Even while opposing Indian rule, the slogan unwittingly used the colloquialism for *border*. While the people chanting these slogans believed in the ideal of self-determination and independence and knew that the LoC is not a legal border, the use of the word *bardar* reveals the epistemic violence perpetuated by the Indian state that has trickled into daily language. The casual use of *border* in this slogan demonstrates the obliterations that the epistemic violence (of occupation and militarization) has wreaked on Kashmiris in the postcolonial aftermath. Yet, in general, Kashmiris refer to AJK as “apoar” (other side)—as in going “apoar” for arms training—and the people in AJK are referred to as “apaerim” (those who live “just across”). In colloquial use, these words express a level of proximity and intimacy, for in traditional kinship settings “apaerim” is used to refer to a sibling (or a close neighbor) who lives close by and shares intimate ties.

Kashmiris from AJK sometimes describe the LoC not as a line “between” different parts of Kashmir but as a “temporary agreement between the countries,” noting that “the UN did not tell Kashmiris it is your LoC.”¹³ Many Kashmiris who have crossed over from Indian-administered Kashmir in exoduses to AJK, either for militant training or to escape persecution from Indian government forces, prefer the term *internally displaced people* (IDP) to emphasize their difference from stereotypical refugees who cross national borders. A Kashmiri man commented that being called an IDP is better because it enables the UN “to remember that Kashmir is one country.”¹⁴ Thus, through their deliberate adherence to nomenclature of their choice, Kashmiris challenge enforced citizenship and border categories in order to destabilize the material line of separation between them and their political demands.

Ceasefire and Trade Relations

The symbolic and direct violence in Kashmir is manifested not only in nomenclature related to the partition but also in the fragile relationships between the two regions. People-to-people contact across the LoC, which drove Reshma Bi’s desperate crossing, has been scanty and more or less under a moratorium by the ruling governments of the two countries. Kashmiris on both sides of

the LoC clamor for basic contact; some envisage the LoC as a Line of Culture and Communication.¹⁵ In the early 2000s, a *détente* emerged between India and Pakistan, with nominal human and economic exchanges across the LoC. In 2005 a limited bus service was launched across the LoC for roughly thirty passengers. People who had blood relations across the LoC were allowed travel (after facing intense scrutiny). The cross-LoC travel route is arduous due to extreme surveillance on both sides, which causes delays; buses from the Indian-administered part do not go across directly: people have to disembark on either side, carry their luggage by hand, and walk across the connecting bridge to reach the other side.¹⁶ Ordinary Kashmiris who do not have relations across the LoC can visit only after obtaining a visa outside Kashmir, and must travel by air or road through the Wagah border in Punjab, India.

Cross-LoC trade also began in 2004 but remains nominal, based mostly on the barter of limited goods due to the lack of common currency. This trade has minimal chances of becoming a tangible economic exchange. A businessman from Srinagar calls it a form of “emotional capital” in which Kashmiris invest despite tough, multilayered scrutiny and surveillance by the Indian government.¹⁷ The traders see the cross-LoC trade as a way to establish broken ties with “*apaerim*” rather than creating any true profit. It is reported that Kashmiris in AJK have begun to use the *kanger* (firepot) and *pheran* (woolen winter robe) for keeping warm after the traditional goods became available to them. The Kashmiri businessmen spearheading this cross-LoC trade hope the economic process might become foundational to finding a political solution in future.¹⁸ Their long-term demand is that the region should be made a free trade zone and the historical ties with Central Asia be reestablished. The Indian government has also started investigating traders for illegal money transfers and narcotics. Since a formal structure for banking and communication does not exist, the traders are easily labeled “terrorists” and “smugglers.”

Kashmiri subjectivity and the political desire of Kashmiris for self-determination must be seen in the context of the bifurcation of the region, the neocolonial nature of postcolonial nations, the repressive policies of the Indian state’s military occupation and its deep hostility to Pakistan—which itself has a fraught relation to Kashmiris in AJK—and the sidelining of voices speaking for an independent Kashmir. Kashmiri lives have changed in the postcolonial aftermath in the most unexpected ways, with the dominant nations criminalizing Kashmiri political aspirations. The social, cultural, economic, and political linkages between the divided parts of Kashmir are often obscured by the nationalist paradigms of India and Pakistan that continue to lay passion-

ate claims to the region while subsuming Kashmiris’ own aspirations. Yet, in a critically epistemic consideration, the symbolism of the LoC reminds the world that Kashmir is actually the unfinished business of partition: there are no “borders” that can be drawn without consulting the Kashmiris themselves.

This essay was written before 5 August 2019, when India annulled Kashmir’s special status and put the region under an unprecedented curfew and communication clampdown resulting in a humanitarian crisis. However, the issues and concerns discussed in the essay remain the same.

Notes

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